

St Magnus and St Rognvald – the two Orkney saints

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The Orkney Islands are in the unique position of having not only their own local saint, but *two* of them, Magnus Erlendsson and Rognvald Kali Kolsson, uncle and nephew, remarkable members of the line of earls which descended from one of the two sons of Earl Thorfinn “the Mighty” (d. 1065). This fact is particularly striking when Scotland is not noteworthy for producing saints of the Roman persuasion (Margaret and Gilbert of Dornoch being the only other established ones). Not, of course, that the Orkney saints were Scottish. They were Norwegian, although Magnus was well-known and certainly revered in Scotland.¹

The development of the cults have therefore to be seen and interpreted against their proper Scandinavian background, as will be discussed. But these cults are also essentially a manifestation of the island society where they flourished, and of the earldom dynasty that Magnus and Rognvald were members of – one a failed earl and the other a very successful one. By the twelfth century, when these two earls lived and died and were sanctified, the Viking settlers of the north had become a community of farmers, converted to Christianity and very much part of the Christian world of western Europe. Their society was tied in to the Scandinavian royal and ecclesiastical network. The rulers of the islands, the dynasty of earls, were nominally subject to the kings of Norway, and the bishops were subject to the Scandinavian archbishops, Lund at the time of Magnus’ death and Trondheim when Rognvald was earl. The island communities nonetheless retained a separate and distinct identity, as all island communities are wont to do.

Orkney was a microcosm of a medieval state, and with its own particular form of hybrid culture formed by different outside influences. As well as the eastwards link across the North Sea with

¹ There were reputed appearances of Magnus before the battles of Bannockburn and Harlaw. King Robert the Bruce established an annual gift of money to St Magnus Cathedral.

Norway, the earls were subject to the kings of Scotland, to whom they did homage for their Caithness earldom which lay just across the Pentland Firth to the south. But they also had family ties, and cultural ones, with Iceland, far to the north. Orkney's position in the middle of this maritime zone meant that it became a centre of transmission of different cultural ideas, and absorbed much of these ideas into its own social development, evidenced by its remarkable "twelfth-century Renaissance".²

The earls and their followings still retained at this date a certain freedom from control by kings, and a mobility which is rather remarkable for a small and apparently remote dynasty. It was a result of their naval superiority, their fleets of ships, their knowledge of the seas and waterways built up on centuries of experience and traditions passed down from their Viking ancestors. They had an independence and self-confidence which is perhaps rather unusual among twelfth-century northern societies. The striking growth of belief in the holiness of two members of the earldom dynasty is a reflection of a marked individualism, which certainly indicates that the islanders had a very special identity of their own.

It is as an example of a "national" cult that the belief in the sanctity of Magnus Erlendsson can be understood: he was the more widely revered of the two saints, and his fame spread throughout the northern world. He was there acknowledged to be a martyr for the faith and a powerful protector of the faithful. As a "national" saint, representing the ruling dynasty of the Orkney islands, Magnus is on a par with the national saints of Scandinavia, where secular rulers were adopted by each of the kingdoms as a symbol of religious and national identity during the Middle Ages.

Royal Saints of Scandinavia

Olaf Haraldsson of Norway was killed at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030, fighting against the forces of the foreign conqueror Cnut "the Great" of England. He became quickly identified with the concept of "national independence", or freedom from domination by the Anglo-

² *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-century Renaissance*, ed. B.E. Crawford (1988).

Danish dynasty, and the ikon of Norwegian identity in the struggle against Danish overlordship. He was also considered to be the king responsible for finally converting the Norwegians, so he was revered as a spiritual leader also. His recognition as a saint happened very quickly.³

Knud II of Denmark was murdered in St Alban's Church in Odense in 1085 during an insurrection against his financial policies in favour of the Church. He was canonised c.1100. Erik of Sweden was killed by his own people in battle in 1160. All three were therefore murdered by rival factions in the context of a political struggle in countries newly unified where the Christian religion had only been established comparatively recently, and where the Church was striving to be independent. The elements of national identity, religious fervour, ecclesiastical pretensions and political struggle all play a part in the growth of the cults of these saintly rulers, including that of Magnus of Orkney. His perceived "martyrdom", and the development of his sanctity can be best understood against this common Scandinavian background.

Political struggle

Focussing on the last of these elements, the political struggle, this can be seen to have been of paramount importance for our understanding of how the martyrdom happened, for Magnus was killed by his cousin Hakon Paulsson in a tussle over the division of lands and power in their joint earldom. Basic to this situation is the fact that the earldom was divisible, and that all sons and nephews of previous earls could make a claim to share in the lands, income and rights of the earldom. Such divisions had taken place fairly often in the tenth and eleventh centuries, when two and sometimes three earls had ruled jointly, which was not a situation conducive to peaceful times. From the late eleventh century two rival lines established themselves and the

³ Evidence for the rapid and wide acknowledgement of Olaf's sanctity is proven by Anglo-Saxon record of the events of 1030 (which was written about 1050), of the burial of Jarl Siward in 1055 in Galmanho in York, in the church which he had dedicated to Olaf, and of the church dedicated to him in Exeter about the same time (B. Dickens, "The Cult of St Olave in the British Isles", *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, xii, 1940, 54).

descendants of Paul and Erlend Thorfinsson formed two distinct dynasties which controlled different halves of Orkney, Caithness and Shetland. The rival earls drew their support from the half they inherited, and a nexus of loyalty to them was built up in the two separate political divisions. The situation descended into rivalry with the cousins Hakon Paulsson and Magnus Erlendsson (see tree of earldom descent).

The earls even looked different ways for outside support, Hakon to Norway, where he was related to the royal family, being a great-grandson of King Magnus the Good, and the Orkneyinga saga says that he “considered himself more highly-born than the others” (*OS*, ch.34). Magnus seems to have fostered his Scottish links, and was certainly not committed to the Norwegian cause from the account of his behaviour at the Battle of Menai Straits. This is the famous saga story of Magnus’ refusal to fight. It happened when both Hakon and Magnus were taken in the *hird* (military following) of King Magnus Barelegs on his war expedition to the Western Isles and the Irish Sea in 1098. The two young heirs to the Orkney earldom⁴ were taken on board the king’s own warship and Magnus appointed cupbearer to the king (a signal honour). He would of course have sworn an oath of loyalty to follow and serve the king. But when they got to the Menai Straits and were opposed by the Norman earls in battle, Magnus refused to fight:

The king asked him why he was sitting around and his answer was that he had no quarrel with anyone there.

“That’s why I’ve no intention of fighting”, he said.

“If you haven’t the guts to fight”, said the King, “and in my opinion this has nothing to do with your Faith, get below. Don’t lie there under everybody’s feet”. (*OS*, ch. 39)⁵

How do we interpret this incident? We have to assume that *some* insubordination lay behind the well-remembered tradition. It certainly

⁴ The ruling earls at the time were sent to Norway by King Magnus, which gives a clear impression that the Norwegian king fully intended to control this earldom and tie the earls firmly into his own administration.

⁵ *OS* = *Orkneyinga Saga*, mostly from the Palsson and Edwards translation (1978), but sometimes from the Taylor edition (1938).

suggests that Magnus Erlendsson was a very unordinary young man, who deliberately went against the oath of loyalty he had given his king. The most heinous crime in the medieval code of conduct was to act disloyally or against the interests of one's lord, and in this instance it was even worse than that. Magnus had joined the royal expedition, he had accepted royal hospitality, he had been given a position of honour in the king's household and he responded with a gratuitous insult. It suggests that his behaviour was more politically motivated than merely an expression of stubborn piety. Was it symbolic of his deliberate rejection of Norwegian royal authority? Does it indicate that Magnus cared little for the interest of his Norwegian overlord, but was more committed to the cause of his Scottish king? Not surprisingly, he deserted the royal fleet on its return journey and spent the next six or seven years in exile until the death of Magnus Barelegs and the collapse of royal authority in Orkney.

During this period Magnus is said in the saga to have joined the bodyguard of the king of Scots, and according to the Longer Magnus saga he spent a year at the Court of Henry I of England. He may have established links with the archbishopric of York, which claimed authority over the diocese of Orkney, in opposition to the archbishopric of Lund. It is known from a later source that a bishop was appointed to the see of Orkney by York in the early twelfth century.⁶ This must have been a rival appointment to that of the Norwegian bishop, William the Old.

We have then two earls holding separate halves of the earldom with very different sources of support, and probably each with his own bishop. Some sort of balance of power was held for a while. The saga accounts say that Hakon and Magnus went on expeditions together and ruled jointly, Magnus being remembered as a harsh but just ruler. Inevitably, the relationship between the two earls deteriorated, and they fell out over their respective spheres of authority, with Hakon wanting his friends to have a larger share than his cousin's following, although the culmination of their quarrel is

⁶ B.E. Crawford, "Bishops of Orkney in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: bibliography and biographical list", *The Innes Review*, 47 (1996), 4.

said to have been caused by troublemakers who “set out to destroy their friendship” (*OS*. ch. 46).

Events leading up to Magnus’ murder

Both sides met at Tingwall, on the Orkney Mainland “where the people of Orkney had their place of assembly” (*OS*, ch. 47), but prepared for battle. This was therefore a *stefnuleidang*, or battle council which envisaged that the meeting would end in violence. However the attempts at reconciliation were successful and the earls swore oaths and shook hands on an agreement, although of what kind is not said. This meeting took place in Lent, and a second meeting to confirm the peace agreement was arranged for Holy Week (the year is uncertain, probably 1116 or 1117), on the island of Egilsay. The choice of Egilsay must have been put forward by the bishop, William the Old, who held the island as episcopal estate and had a residence there (although the role of the church as such in these events is never mentioned in the saga account).

The meeting for the “final settlement” turned, however, into an occasion of treachery and deceit, and the eventual murder of Magnus seems not to have been in doubt, according to the saga accounts. It is very difficult indeed to make any rational assessment of the circumstances surrounding the doomed earl’s martyrdom, and perhaps one should not try too hard to do so. The three surviving accounts were written many decades after the event and when the cult of sanctity was gathering force, so that the course of events had already become enveloped in a fog of religious enthusiasm and hagiographical hype. We cannot in these circumstances expect to have a balanced rational account, for the purpose was to record the last moments of this martyr for the faith, with all the right tear-jerking details.

What makes the accounts even more difficult to evaluate as historical sources is their literary quality. They were written according to the best Icelandic saga-telling tradition, and skilfully weave in literary motifs, or *topoi*, such as the element of treachery and the supernatural happening – to heighten the tension – as well as the contrived conversations between the doomed man and his murderers. Although we should regard these with the usual scholarly caution, it is noteworthy that these conversations were said to have been described by Holdbodi “an honest man from the Hebrides”, and

one of two companions remaining with Magnus when he was executed. Holdbodi's account has no doubt been elaborated by the saga writer in the interest of "ecclesiastical correctness". An historical assessment of the martyrdom might describe it as something like a judicial execution, the outcome of a peace meeting which went wrong, with a vociferous majority of the local chieftains supporting Hakon as sole ruler. They insisted that the two earls could not continue to rule jointly, and that one or other of them had to be killed:

"Better kill him then" said Hakon. "I don't want an early death: I much prefer ruling over people and places." (*OS*, ch. 49)

Magnus certainly submitted to his fate with the appropriate meekness of the martyr, according to the account. He did not fight for his life and the absence of any reference to his band of supporters who had gone to Egilsay with him is unexplained. What happened to them? There is the suggestion in one account that he attempted to hide, but he certainly made no attempt to escape from the island. In the end he is represented as having willingly submitted to his fate, which may be part of the hagiographical touch to the account of his death, which had to be presented as a true martyrdom. For Magnus' death was not in the course of pursuing a noble cause; he did not die against the foreign invader, or helping to strengthen the church's position, as the other royal saints of Scandinavia. It looks on the face of it as if he died in the course of pursuing his own dynastic ambitions and not in the furthering of a more noble cause. So the proponents of his holiness had to make his death appear as holy as possible.

Proponents of Magnus' Cult

Those proponents, Magnus' relatives and supporters, were certainly a very important element in the establishing of the cult. They can be seen as setting out deliberately to "cash in" on the growing belief in the sanctification of the dead earl, and the acquisition of a martyr in the family – a very useful adjunct for any ruling family to have. This was in the interest of the Erlend line of earls, who in the first instance were of course disadvantaged by the death of their relative and the establishment of sole rule by Hakon Paulsson throughout all the

islands, as well as Caithness and Shetland. The main proponent was Magnus' nephew Rognvald, who was the only male heir to the Erlend line, through his mother Gunnhild, Magnus' sister. He had a right to claim the lands of his murdered uncle, he had to get the acknowledgement of the king of Norway to the assertion of his right, and then had to establish his claim in the islands. Rognvald was spectacularly successful in achieving all this, and he used his uncle's martyrdom as a platform on which to base his just and incontrovertible right to half the earldom lands and rights. He himself added further lustre to the dynasty when he was killed in 1158 at the hands of his opponents and became the second saint of the earldom family.

However, there were other elements apart from political activism in the creation of a saint, and certain requirements which had to be satisfied. Although the process was not as formalised as it later became (in the later twelfth century), there were several elements which were basic to the successful conclusion of attempts to get a saint's holiness recognised:

1. The veneration of local people
2. The support of the local bishop
3. Proof of miracles at the dead person's tomb
4. Evidence of the incorruptibility of the corporeal relics.

The saga account gives full details about all three, one section indeed being a Miracle Book (*Jarteinabok*), which listed all the miraculous cures which took place at Magnus' burial place (first at Birsay, the earls' main residence in the west mainland of Orkney, and then at Kirkwall, after the transferral of Magnus' remains). It is interesting to note that the majority of these cures happened to Shetlanders, and Shetland had been part of the half of the earldom which Magnus ruled, where, indeed Rognvald based himself when staking his claim to that half of the earldom (*OS*, ch. 68). It appears from the Miracle Book that the cult of Magnus was primarily established by the faith of the Shetlanders in the dead earl's ability to achieve miraculous cures, many of which happened to the family of a

farmer, Bergfin Skatisson from the north mainland of Shetland.⁷ But of course the dominant position of Earl Hakon, followed by his son, Paul, meant, as the saga tells us, that the stories of the miracles “were not freely aired” in the Orkneys (*OS*, ch. 56).

The position of the bishop is particularly revealing. The current bishop was William the Old, who was closely connected with Earls Hakon and Paul, and indeed more of a chaplain to the earls, with his cathedral church in close association with their residence at Birsay. Not until the bishops had their own well-endowed cathedral in Kirkwall did they become more independent prelates. William’s antagonism to the growing belief in Magnus’ sanctity, which he decried, by calling the stories “sheer heresy” (*OS*, ch. 56), is therefore not surprising: and the general comment is also made about him, which must reflect well-remembered tradition, that “for a long time he doubted the saintliness of Earl Magnus” (*OS*, ch. 52). However after a visit to Norway, Bishop William had a remarkable change of heart, and his conversion to belief in the earl’s sanctity is described in the *Miracle Book* as having been caused by miraculous happenings (*OS*, ch. 57). It seems very likely that shrewd recognition of a change in the direction of the political wind also convinced him of the wisdom of taking positive action to get the cult recognised, as Rognvald Kali Kolsson showed himself active in pursuing his claim to Magnus’ half of the earldom. The benefits which would accrue to the bishop’s own situation, if a cult were established, and if the saint’s grave were to be housed in a cathedral suitable enough to be a monument to the power and prestige of the earldom, must have overwhelmed any lingering doubts that William may have had about the saintliness of the dead earl.

Therefore he led a move to have the corporeal relics translated and enshrined, said in the saga to have taken place twenty-one years after his death (1137-8). The saint’s bones displayed sufficient evidence of surviving the test of burning by fire, and the requirements for “canonisation” had been fulfilled: papal confirmation was not necessary at this date. The sequence of events is very unclear in the

⁷ B.E. Crawford, “The Cult of St Magnus in Shetland” in *Essays in Shetland History*, ed. B.E. Crawford (1984), 72.

saga account, but all this happened at about the time that Rognvald was himself triumphing in his attempts to get possession of his inheritance from his second cousins, Paul and Harald Hakonsson. It can be said that he achieved this on the “Magnus ticket”, and the programme on which his campaign was based, is expressed quite clearly in the remarkable speech made by his father, Kol Kalisson, who was the architect of Rognvald’s plans for conquest, as well as the architect of the shrine to his uncle:

Now, here’s my advice: look for support where men will say the true owner of the realm granted it to you, and that’s the holy Earl Magnus, your uncle.⁸ (*OS*, ch. 68)

This piece of advice is followed up by the request that, should the saint grant his realm to his nephew, Rognvald would build a “stone minster at Kirkwall more magnificent than any in Orkney” to house the relics, which would be dedicated to Magnus and endowed with the necessary funds. How rarely do we have the details of when and how and by whom the medieval cathedrals of our country were built, and certainly in no other instance in Scotland! Here is dramatic evidence of the political strategy underlying the building of St Magnus Cathedral, a strategy combining secular and ecclesiastical policies which were initiated and carried through by Rognvald and his father, and in which the clerical personnel seem – according to the saga account – to have played a minor role.

The remarkable Romanesque House of God in Kirkwall, dedicated to St Magnus is the result of the political activism of Rognvald and his father, and it is testimony to the wealth and cultural achievements of the earldom dynasty in the mid-twelfth century. The saga makes it clear that they were responsible for its construction and for the funding (*OS*, ch. 76), although it is the architectural historians who tell us that the design and sculpture was based on Durham

⁸ The presentation of Magnus as the “owner” of the realm accords with other instances in Scandinavian sources where the saint is regarded as the holy protector of the land, who is able to bestow it on his successors (information acquired with acknowledgements to my research student Haki Antonsson, who is completing a doctoral thesis on the cult of St Magnus and the royal and princely cults of Scandinavia).

Cathedral and Dunfermline Abbey, from where the masons must have come.⁹ Rapid progress was made at the east end and transepts, but this was not maintained, due to funding difficulties, and the completion of the nave took a long time. Nevertheless, the bishops of Orkney had the finest Romanesque building north of Dunfermline as their cathedral church, and a centre of pilgrimage to the shrine of the martyred earl, all of which must have added greatly to their prestige and wealth. This was in addition to the generous endowments of land which Rognvald made for the upkeep of the cathedral and its officiating clergy. This factor is probably basic to our understanding of why Rognvald himself was created Orkney's second princely saint.

Rognvald "the Holy"

Rognvald's success in winning power was not achieved without a hard fight against the rival dynasty, and the need to manoeuvre and fight to retain his dominant position never ceased. He had only been ruling for two years when a powerful embassy from Scotland arrived in Orkney to negotiate the sharing of power with a young grandson of Hakon Paulsson, Harald Maddadson from Atholl. It is one of Earl Rognvald's remarkable characteristics that he was prepared to come to agreement over the division of Orkney – although it was stated that he was to have the final say in disputes – and for some time he and Harald ruled amicably together. This is not to say that their joint rule was peaceful, as there were other rival claimants around, as well as some notable trouble-makers, such as Swein Asleifarson! But Rognvald managed to retain control, and was able to leave the earldom for some years, 1151-3, when he went to the Holy Land on his famous pilgrimage.

Rognvald was a most successful earl in many more ways than simply keeping himself militarily secure. He was skilled in many sporting and artistic achievements, and boasts of his prowess at the nine arts (*OS*, ch. 58). Above all he was one of the finest skalds of the

⁹ S. Cruden, "The Founding and building of the Twelfth-Century Cathedral of St Magnus" in Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, 82; R. Fawcett, "Kirkwall Cathedral: an Architectural Analysis" in Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, 88-9; E. Cambridge, "The Architectural Context of the Romanesque Cathedral at Kirkwall" in Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, 111.

Norse world, and his poetry has survived in many different Icelandic manuscripts:

He was immensely popular there in the Isles and far and wide elsewhere. He was a friend in need to many a man, liberal in money matters, equable of temper, steadfast in friendship, skilfull in feats of strength and a good skald. (*OS*, Taylor, ch. 104)

Yet he met a violent death also. Perhaps he was too popular and too successful and this excited the jealousy of one rival faction, and in particular Thorbjorn Clerk, with whom he had a protracted feud. So he met his death in the pursuing of an outlaw, who was a great trouble-maker in north Scotland – not in a power struggle with rivals over the division of the earldom, as his uncle had. His death was probably unintentional, he received two blows in a scrum as he and his party were trying to flush out Thorbjorn from his hiding-place in the upper part of Thursodale. It was enough of a violent end – and in the pursuance of his duty as a Christian ruler trying to right wrong – to provide the right credentials for turning this earl also into a martyr for the faith:

On the boulder where Earl Rognvald's blood had poured when he was killed we can still see it, as lovely as if it had been newly spilt. (*OS*, ch. 104)

He was buried in St Magnus Cathedral by Earl Harald who took his body back with great honour, and he was deeply mourned “for he had been much loved in the Isles”. The saga is brief and specific about the development of his saintly status:

God made manifest the worthiness of the Earl with a number of wondrous miracles whereupon with the Pope's permission, Bishop Bjarni had his holy relics translated. (*OS*, ch. 104)

This took place some thirty-five years after his death, and the Icelandic Annals record under the year 1192 “Earl Rognvald sanctified”.¹⁰ So the three elements of popular support, evidence of

¹⁰ *Íslandske Annaler*, ed. G. Storm (1888), 120.

miracles and episcopal agreement – as well as papal ratification apparently – are all present. But what was the underlying motivation in this instance, where political pressure does not seem to be important? He was undoubtedly pious in a conventional twelfth-century sense; the achievement of the pilgrimage, accompanied by Bishop William was entirely Earl Rognvald's, which enterprise would have been funded by him. But many other members of the European nobility made the same journey, at their own expense, and did not qualify for the status of saint. Above all, I would suggest that it was his remarkable efforts to found and build the cathedral of St. Magnus, and endow the body of clergy, which earned him saintly status, and that it was ecclesiastical pressure which lay behind the promotion.

Bishop Bjarni is clearly the promoter of the cult. He was a powerful bishop (1188-1223), who was related to Earl Harald Maddadson, and who was much involved with the earls' position in connection with their Norwegian overlords.¹¹ He was in a position to fully appreciate the benefits for the Church in Orkney of Earl Rognvald's energy and foresight with regard to the establishment of Magnus' cult, a development which had resulted in the elevation of Kirkwall to the level of an international pilgrimage centre like Trondheim, the focus of pilgrimage to St Olaf's shrine. This Norwegian see had been given archiepiscopal status in 1152-3, with authority over the bishops of the North Atlantic islands, just at the time when the bishop of Orkney's status was rising, with the growth of the cult of Magnus and the development of Kirkwall as a pilgrimage centre, like Trondheim. As stressed above, Rognvald had been the prime mover in this development as well as the main benefactor, and the bishop had reason to be very grateful to him for Orkney's enhanced status in the Norwegian ecclesiastical hierarchy. Bjarni's gratitude and promotion of Rognvald would seem to be the prime reason for this second earl's rise to the saintly level of his uncle, whose cult Rognvald himself had done so much to foster.

¹¹ Crawford, "Bishops of Orkney", 12-13.

The Two Orkney Saints

In this way, the Orkney islands acquired two saints, which, as said, was a remarkable achievement for these “remote” islands, apparently far from the centres of power and influence in medieval Christian Europe. It was also an impressive achievement for the earldom dynasty, which could only benefit from the protection brought to its members by these saintly forebears. Of the two saints, Magnus was always the more renowned, and his cult did take on an international dimension,¹² particularly in Scandinavia and the north Atlantic. The cathedral church of the Faeroe Islands was dedicated to Magnus, and possessed relics, as did the episcopal seat at Skalholt in Iceland.

Rognvald was not revered to the same extent, although he was usually known as “the Holy”, and his feast day is included in some Icelandic Calendars, but there are no known churches or altars dedicated to him. Nor has any liturgy been recorded or *Vita* survived. He is likely to have been culted primarily among the cathedral clergy in Kirkwall, for whom he had especial significance as their founder and benefactor: and if the statue on Bishop Reid’s Tower in Kirkwall is indeed a representation of Rognvald (as has been argued),¹³ then its survival and location in a niche on the bishop’s tower, is remarkable evidence for his special place among the clerical community. This tower was part of the episcopal palace and the preservation of a medieval statue, which had probably come from the cathedral, and its placing in a dominant position on that tower suggests that the individual represented retained a special significance for the bishops, even into the post-Reformation period.

Such a survival is rare in Scotland, and the preservation of fine statues of Magnus and Olaf at Kirkwall also (now in the Tankerness House Museum), is further evidence for the important role of the local and national saints in the religious life of the islands. It is of course difficult to find out anything about the continuing success of these cults in the remaining centuries of the Middle Ages, because of the sweeping away of all trappings of the worship of saints and their relics at the Reformation. The *Miracle Book* gives us a glimpse of the

¹² J. Mooney, *St Magnus* (1935), pt. iv.

¹³ B.E. Crawford, “An Unrecognised Statue of Earl Rognvald?” in B.E. Crawford, *Northern Isles Connections* (1996).

fervent faith and hope which the faithful put in the efficacy of Magnus' saintly powers, while the thirteenth-century extension to the east end of St Magnus Cathedral is tangible and impressive evidence of the increased demand for space, to cope with the numbers visiting the shrines of the two Orkney saints. It is possible that this extension may have been initiated by Bishop Bjarni.¹⁴ The magnificent shrines themselves have not survived, but the inner wooden "kist" which contained the bones of Magnus, was at some point secreted in a pillar of the cathedral, and discovered by workmen many centuries later.¹⁵ In fact two sets of bones were discovered hidden in this way, and it would seem undeniable that these must represent the skeletons of the two Orkney saints hidden at the Reformation by the cathedral clergy to avoid desecration of the remains of their special and beloved protectors.

The wealth of information that has survived about the two Orkney saints, primarily in the saga account, provides a rare glimpse of the reasons which lay behind the growth of such local cults. This sort of evidence is of course derived from the rich Old Norse literary culture, and the background to our cults is entirely Scandinavian. As well as the royal and princely saints local holy men and women were rather numerous, in Denmark and Sweden in particular.¹⁶ The many and varied reasons for popular belief in the sanctity of those who died violent deaths are hard to classify, but in the case of Magnus and Rognvald, we can point to political and ecclesiastical factors as playing important roles. Whatever the reasons for their achievement of saintly status, the position of these saint-earls as rulers of the island society which they governed accords the earldom a status quite above that of most medieval principalities, and must have accorded their descendants respect and honour throughout Scandinavia and beyond.

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¹⁴ R. Cant, "Norwegian Influences in the Design of the Transitional and Gothic Cathedral" in Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, 133-5.

¹⁵ Mooney, *St Magnus*, 254; Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, Plates 1a and b.

¹⁶ T. Jexlev, "The Cult of Saints in Early Medieval Scandinavia" in Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, 183-9.

EARLDOMS OF ORKNEY AND CAITHNESS Demise of Old Line

